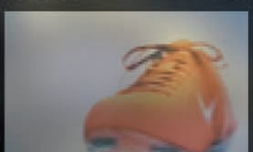


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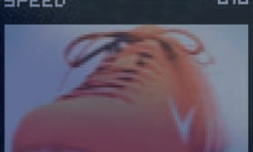
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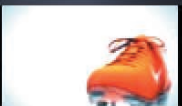
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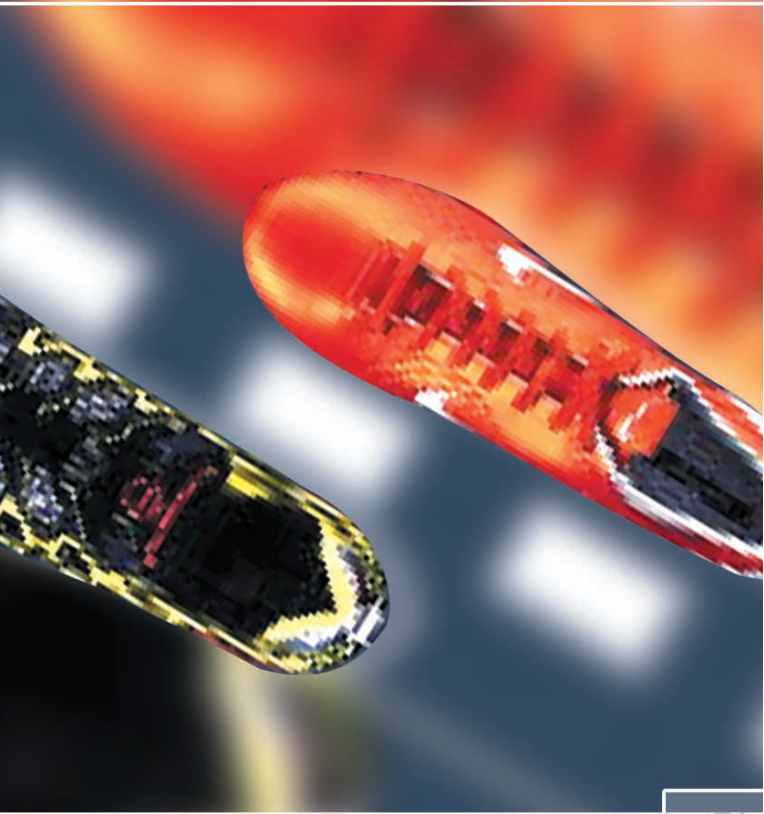
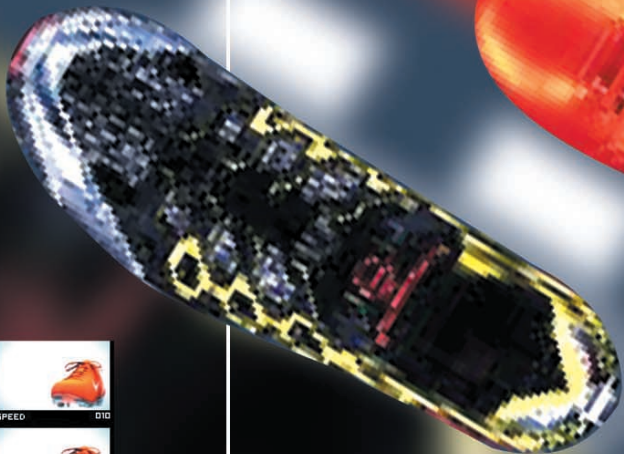
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Jaspers snakes

'MERCURIAL VAPOR' AND 'ZOOM SUPER FLY P' MIGHT SOUND LIKE SOMETHING HUGGY BEAR WOULD EXUDE AFTER SESSION OF STRONG BEER AND MEXICAN FOOD, BUT THEY'RE ACTUALLY TWO OF THE PRODUCTS FEATURED ON NIKE'S NEW EXPERIMENTAL SITE AND ONLINE EXHIBITION, NIKELAB. LET'S EXPLORE THIS WORK OF ART...

SITE: Nikelab (www.nikelab.com)

CLIENT: Nike

DESIGN AGENCY: R/GA (www.rga.com) and others

LAUNCH DATE: November 2002

SIZE OF DEVELOPMENT TEAM: Varied, five at its smallest

TECHNOLOGY USED: Flash MX, Shockwave, 3ds max, QuickTime

IN A SENTENCE: "Nikelab.com is an interactive, cinematic experience of Nike innovation and inspiration"

SEE IT IN ACTION: There's an overview demo of this project, viewable on the CreateOnline website – visit www.createonline.co.uk/eo34

Madonna once referred to her book *Sex* as the perfect union between art and commerce. Well, Mrs Ritchie might just find her claim challenged by a new site for Nike designed by New York's R/GA and a host of esteemed interactive designers. Nikelab has all the features you'd expect from a Nike site: pictures of Nike wares, Swooshes™, and the ability to order online. However, the real juice here is that R/GA commissioned many of the great and good across the industry to contribute work to the site. By great and good, we mean the type of people that make Jakob Nielsen shake his head horror, who make the D&AD raise an eyebrow. The list includes not only Joshua Davis and Yugo Nakamura, but also Edwards Churcher, eBoy, Leciestbleu and Manny Tan. They were all asked by R/GA to interpret abstract characteristics or benefits of using the featured Nike products: themes like power, speed, comfort, cushioning, movement, and durability.

The mastermind behind it all is Rei Inamoto, the project's Art Director at R/GA – the interactive agency of choice for Nike US since 2001. When the design firm was asked to come up with a new site that would show off the innovation and inspiration behind Nike products Inamoto had an idea. In keeping with the Nike's above the line ad campaign in the US, where established artists create work based on Nike products, why not take the concept to the web. The site would be like an online exhibition of interactive installations, curated by R/GA. And so the idea for Nikelab as it currently exists was born.

BRAINSTORMING NIGHT AND DAY

But R/GA still had a lot of work to do. The company had to design the site overall, finding ways to feature the Nike products as well as the commissioned pieces. That was mostly the result of a long hard brainstorming process, which lasted two weeks by Inamoto's account.

"It was certainly one of the most challenging aspects of this whole project; to come up with an idea that was broad enough to accommodate what we were trying to say and



CONTRIBUTOR 1: MANNY TAN

Among the many digital artists invited to contribute to the Nike Lab site was New York's Manny Tan. Manny is behind experimental *Flash* site Uncontrol. His involvement with Nikelab concerns the air cushioning of the Air Max Plus V trainer. The piece enables you to control onscreen movement by blowing into your computer's microphone, though you can use a mouse if your equipment is lacking.

"I was given complete freedom to create any idea that I deemed appropriate," Tan comments. "After a weekend of thought, I gave them my idea, they liked it and we agreed to do it. The initial presentations and meetings with RGA allowed plenty of room for experimentation. Later on, we refined the idea and eventually came up with this piece."

His inspiration comes from the nature of air itself—an invisible presence that we can only tell exists when it interacts with something else. Explains Tan: "I wanted to create an experiment that uses air as a means to interface with something. One of my prior experiments utilised a microphone as a means of input. On top of all that, I was inspired by the works of insertsilence (insertsilence.com) which utilises the microphone input. It seemed like a logical direction to take."

His section took him around two weeks to research, another two to create and 'a few weeks to revise', he remembers. He also acknowledges a bit of help from both Craig Swann and Amit Pitaru to perfect the necessary *Flash MX* code. Thanks to advances in *Flash* and Java, this sort of thing is likely to become used more widely as a means to interact online, Manny predicts. "It adds so much more depth than just using a mouse and keyboard," he continues. "In a few years, when new software and hardware interfaces become more prolific, you'll see an explosion of new ideas and concepts that have never been possible with just a standard mouse and keyboard."

www.uncontrol.com



One of the site's most important features is the ability to customise the Nike products on offer, craftily combining detailed photography with *Flash MX*



"WE WANTED – FROM A DESIGN PERSPECTIVE AS WELL AS A TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVE – TO PUSH THE ENVELOPE AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE. TO COME UP WITH AN EXPERIENCE THAT IS TOTALLY UNIQUE"

REI INAMOTO

that wasn't out there yet."

That concerned the overall look and feel of the site. However, contributors had to be commissioned, leading to the list mentioned previously. They were chosen by the suitability of their design styles to the concepts in question.

However, it wasn't as simple as giving them a green light to design, although in many cases, third parties had considerable creative freedom.

"One thing that we had to do was to educate them about this project first and then about the project that they were interpreting and then about Nike as a brand," recalls Inamoto. "We had a pretty clearly defined goal for each of the products that we gave to artists. So the initial part was to bring them up to speed, directing them pretty heavily, in certain directions."

FULL COLLABORATION

How agencies worked with R/GA varied. For example, the American football simulation game featuring eBoy's work involved a lot of cooperation. "We came up with the initial concept of the virtual game," he begins. "I worked with a copywriter who came up with the script, then we also worked with a game designer who designed the logic and the rules, and an interaction designer who worked with the game designer to come up with an exact spec for what we needed from eBoy."

It enabled them to work out the number and sizes of the robots to be designed. It also provided the number of separate poses that would be required in order to generate the animations' frames. "Once we directed them, they then provided us back with a set of illustrations that we took from them and



unified enough so that there was a coherent voice on the site."

For inspiration, R/GA looked to film, exhibition space and installation design. "We consciously did that in order to avoid doing – consciously or unconsciously – something that other people have done in the past," explains Inamoto. "And the reason was to come up with something that was completely unique and completely new. Something

Much of Nikelab's inspiration was drawn from the world of film in order to ensure that the site design remained original and unique

CONTRIBUTOR 2: EDWARDS CHURCHER

London's Edwards Churcher has won some of the most prestigious design awards around, including its 2001 collaboration with Studio AKA, Birdgame. For Nike Lab, the company created two games that simulate the speed possible while wearing the Mercurial Vapor football boot and the Super Fly P track shoe. R/GA first approached Edwards Churcher in August, suggesting a Scalextric type game. But this idea was eventually executed by R/GA in-house.

"We proposed a more console-based experience because we like that kind of crossover," explains Director Neil Churcher. "We were looking at car race

gaming like *Need For Speed III* and *Burnout* on the GameCube, and thought those simulated a real experience of speed. The challenge was to replicate that kind of experience within the limitations of the web."

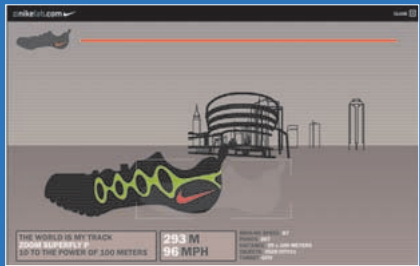
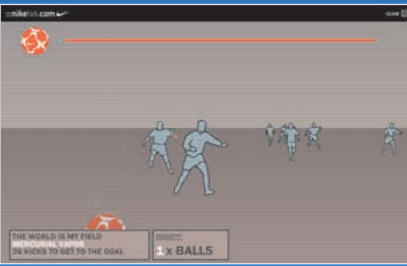
Development began in September and was completed in time for the site's 15 November launch. "The proposal did constantly change initially so the development time was tight, but we managed to construct it using many components we've created since *Flash MX* was introduced," adds Churcher.

"R/GA commissioned us to produce an individual Edwards Churcher piece for Nike, so were very hands-off.

We did continuously model prototypes and discussed them regularly with R/GA who were specifically concerned with retaining the essence of the product, the issue of speed for instance, and advised us at that level. The process mostly consisted of them encouraging us to be as creative as possible within the brief.

"We tried to make a very engaging gameplay that people would actually want to play rather than just be amused by," he concludes. "I think R/GA wanted to achieve something as compelling as possible and I think we did that."

www.edwardschurcher.com



implemented them into a workable playable game," Inamoto concludes.

SERIOUS BUSINESS

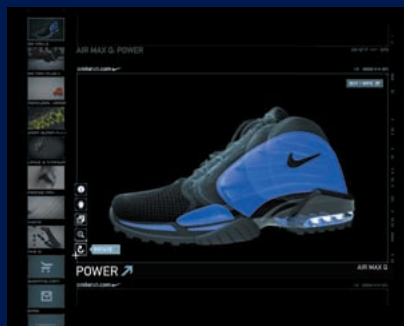
But it wasn't just about games. R/GA also had to build the site overall, including an innovative, film-inspired navigation system, as well as views of the products from a variety of angles. This, too, was a job and a half.

It took Inamoto to Nike HQ in Portland in order to meet the products' designers, gaining insight and a whole lot of written plans and sketches. These would eventually enable one of the site's features: the ability to manipulate the products online and even peel away outer layers so you can get closer than close. For this, New York's Tronic provided 3D skills via Discreet's *3ds max*. Inamoto provided visuals which were then modelled in a variety of views. Each of these was exported out as a frame for inclusion in a *Flash* file.

But what would Jakob Nielsen say? After all, NikeLab is certainly guilty of flouting one or two of his usability guidelines. For R/GA and certainly for Nike, this was no problem. "Nike gave us a directive to produce a site that was truly innovative and unique," comments Inamoto. "In order to accomplish that uniqueness, we wanted from a design perspective as well as a technology perspective, to – I don't want to sound clichéd – but push the envelope as much as possible. To come up with an experience that is totally unique."

If you're using a modem, you'll need to get hold of a fresh supply of teabags and some kettle cleaner: it does take a while to download. But Nikelab manages to be a corporate site dominated by experimental interactive art and design. So while Madonna might have a great body, Nikelab is a damnsite better than *Sex*.

TEXT: GRAEME AYMER



Nikelab's contributions range from games to the more experimental. Manny Tan's submission enables you to control a feather-like trainer onscreen using your computer's microphone, while eBoy's piece is a more traditional *Flash* game, done in conjunction with R/GA

CONTRIBUTOR 3: LECIELESTBLEU



Paris's Lecielestbleu is well known for its *Puppet Tool*, a Lingo-based application that enables you to manipulate animated creatures online to curious effect.

R/GA got in touch at the end of August, with an invitation to participate in the Nike Lab project. "We had a lot of freedom and basically they came to us because they'd seen our work or our site," explains joint Creative Director Kristine Malden. "Oddly enough



there wasn't any point at which we said: 'this is the idea, full steam ahead on production'. It was one of many trials that we did. I guess we were speaking to R/GA about once every

week, and that kind of continued throughout the production, basically. We would just upload things and they would take a look and then we would have a conference call. At one point we had a conference call between Paris, New York and Portland, Oregon."

In all, development took about three months – not counting the five years that the company's joint Creative Director Frédéric Durieu spent developing the *Puppet Tool* Lingo. In the end, they came up with Zerpo, a kind of cross between a crash test dummy and a mannequin, who you can bash around to a soundtrack while he wears the PSA 128 Max MP3 player. "We looked at a number of urban lifestyle magazines and we were struck by this sport of kids who do crazy things," Malden explains. "They jump off walls and they scale buildings. We thought it was the perfect combination between what we wanted to with our tool onscreen and the kind of urban Nike culture. So that was a kind of fusion between those things."

www.lecielestbleu.com